

Winter 2008

## The Couch

Syd Harriet

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Harriet, Syd (2008) "The Couch," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 68 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss68/23>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

*The Couch*

1

One day, my mother settled on the couch and stayed. That day, what, a while back, she came home looking terrified with some of her things in a shopping bag.

"You're good as new," I said and put a pile of magazines on the coffee table and got two glasses of water from the kitchen. It began to rain. I removed my golf cap and put that on a chair next to the picture of my father.

"Dad called," she said. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"He's on his way back, too."

My father got his diagnosis the same time as my mother. I wanted to be positive so I said, "Maybe."

"He said, 'Four p.m. sharp,'" she said. "But he wants me on the couch." She rearranged the pillows to look like my dad was lying next to her.

I tried to describe to my mother the confusion that set in when I couldn't remember where my dad said he was going. Then I got on the couch, opposite my mother and next to the pillow that was supposed to be my father.

It was as if this was what I was supposed to do. We spent days on end. When the magazines ran out, we read newspaper flyers for pork-and-bean specials and macaroni-and-cheese dinners. We scanned furniture sale inserts. During all this, my mother joined a book club, and when the books arrived, we sat on the couch traveling to distant cities and foreign shores. "Who wants to leave the couch?" my mother would ask.

"I don't," I'd answer.

We made that talk to lighten things.

And when it got old, we discussed whether or not it was a good idea to get the macaroni-and-cheese dinners or the pork-and-bean specials. Of course, we weren't serious because it would mean one of

us would have to get off the couch and go out. So it was mainly talk. No more.

Most of the time, we read, not getting much out of it, just doing it to do something.

However, I did recall one story about a husband who had to spend his last days on earth stuck in an elevator with his wife.

My mother thought she'd never survive if that were the case, and anyway, she said she thought the story was made up. Nothing like that could happen, she argued. "They have a phone. You can call out."

I told her it was a story and the author was getting at something on a different level, but my mother said she wasn't interested in "different levels" and that was the end of that. No matter. I kept the book nearby on the coffee table that was now cluttered with phone numbers, mostly for restaurants that did take-out.

## 2

In the morning, like clockwork, the newspaper arrived. I read the comics first, the obituary page second, and then ads for this and that. If there were any specials that could be delivered, my mother was the one to spot them. She also read, but in a different way—the editorial page first, the weather second, then sports. My mother liked to tell me what the weather was in different cities, like we were there on vacation, and she would kid and say, "Well since it's only going to get up to twenty, we better bundle up."

"Guess so," I'd say back. "Better stay in and play the radio."

"Go to it."

And I did because I was the one in charge of the radio. My mother was not moving from the couch, as she would argue whenever I brought it up. So I stopped bringing it up, got off the couch and turned it on.

We were going to get the works, the weather announcer reported—big winds, power outages, and floods that would make Noah jealous. With that, my mother said if anything happened to me, she would not be able to go on. She also said she was terribly afraid that something was going to happen, she could just feel it inside.

I didn't like it when she said that, but then I thought, what could happen if I stayed on the couch? So I told my mother not to worry because I was staying right where I was.

However, at noon, I had to move. My mother decided she had to spruce up the couch. She took Lysol and sprayed underneath the sheets and then dressed the couch with new ones. All the while the radio was blaring some same old same old. My mother would listen either sitting up or lying down, but she listened as if she could figure out a way of doing something about our weather. She decided if she took a bath that might work. I didn't argue because it got her off the couch. When she finished she returned in fresh clothes like she was going to a job interview—high heels, lipstick, the works. She told me to turn the radio off so she could sit and listen to nothing but the rain pounding the roof. We could also hear people in the apartment below talking in a foreign language.

"How do they do it?" my mother asked.

"Do what?"

"Live the way they do, so far from home."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

But she didn't answer, just asked me to get her some water from the kitchen. So I fetched a glass and handed it to her as she sat with her legs stretched onto the coffee table. Then I sat on the other end, my legs pushed over the cushions on back.

At that point, with the wind howling and the rain pounding our windows, we began to talk, talk about her life, then mine. She said I used to cry a lot, "a world class crybaby," she'd say. When my father wanted to leave one time after they had a big explosion over me, he left for an hour or two and returned and apologized and promised never to do that again. Then he opened the door and these delivery men from the furniture store brought in the couch. My mother grabbed my father and kissed him everywhere and muttered how she couldn't bear to live without him. That was her favorite story and whenever she got the chance she would tell it again and again.

I made it a point to pretend that it didn't matter.

### 3

One day a friend called who I hadn't heard from in some time. Charlie told me his father spent all his time on a couch. For some reason, Charlie didn't think what my mother and I were up to was so strange compared to his father. He told me when his father reached a certain



station in life, he got on the couch and wouldn't leave. And he talked a lot about the smell of death, blowing up the enemy, the fear that stayed inside to his dying day. My friend said it was in the kitchen where his father's knees gave out. He fell against the counter top, stayed there on the floor until his heart stopped. "I found him and thought he was better off."

When I told my mother the story she became enraged. If my friend was a truth-teller, she said, then that would mean his father spent more time on the couch than he did serving his country. Of course, if he had a leg injury or got hurt in a car crash, that would be different. That would be understandable, my mother said. Then it would make sense if the friend's father got his needs tended by his son, given that the father was genuinely incapacitated. But to just get on the couch and not want to get off, not even to go to the bathroom or get the mail or newspaper, that was not like anyone. At least, my mother said, we got the mail, cooked, got up to use the bathroom, did things. For a man to give up like that was unconscionable, my mother said and then warned me not to talk about the father again when my friend called. When he did call a few weeks later, I changed the subject to Elaine, a girl we both knew in high school that had recently died in an elevator.

4

After a night of non-stop rain, I awoke to hear tree limbs slapping the windows and making these loud screeching noises. I also heard the radio blaring in the kitchen. From where I stood, I could see the couch and the pillow-makeshift-for-my-father covered by a blanket. My mother said she decided to make breakfast and told me to grab a chair. I did. I opened the refrigerator to get some milk. But when I looked inside, I was shocked to see there wasn't any milk or food, only the derby hat my father used to wear.

I asked my mother what she did with the food, and she said it all went into the cereal.

In my cereal bowl were my mother's wedding ring and a necklace my father had given her. And water.

"There's no cereal," I said.

And that is when she shouted I should be grateful.

I didn't answer.

"What's the matter?" my mother asked, pouring more water into my bowl.

I pushed my hand through my hair and scratched my face. I didn't know what to say, knowing that whatever I did would get us going. So I said I wasn't hungry.

"What's the big deal, then?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. I watched her stirring her cereal. Then I left and got back on the couch.

"I don't believe you," my mother yelled from the kitchen. "How long do you plan on doing that?"

"What?" I asked.

She said a million things, but the only comment that stuck was that it was time for me to get off the couch.

"If that's what you want." I said.

"I need it all," she said.

"If that's what you need." I said.

"I'm your mother," she said. "Don't say that." Then she said, "No more breakfast. I'm through."

And that was that. I said nothing more. I looked at the couch and my mother getting on. She grabbed my pillows and tossed them into the middle of the room. I went over and arranged them on the floor. Then I got one of the books from the coffee table, the one about the guy in the elevator, and started reading. My mother began to cry, which was my cue to back off and say, "Mom, you're right. I'm better off here than up there."

5

The next day, after the latest storm report—and it wasn't good—my mother began doing her things again: sole occupancy of the couch, cooking jewelry, and the most recent, making newspaper balls and arranging them in pairs. I thought it was her way of trying to say something to me, something about what was going on inside her. We never talked about what was going on inside me, and I figured it was now or never. So I took the chance and said, "Tell me what's wrong with me."

My mother glanced up from the magazine she was reading. "What did you say?"

"What's wrong with me?" I said again.

"I bet you wish you were here, huh?"

It was no use. It was the same stuff. At least when my father was around my mother was too busy belittling him to spend her time jumping on me. Now, I got the full blast

But I let it go because tears started streaking my mother's cheeks. When I asked what was wrong she didn't say. She grabbed one of the little balls of newspaper and squeezed. Then she pulled at her eyebrow and said, "Let's go out. We can look at new couches. See what's out there."

"What about the storm?" I said.

"C'mon," she said. "We'll have fun. See what they've got."

"Who's going to wait for father?" I asked.

"He'll be fine," she said. "We'll get some take-out for him and bring it back."

"We could, but what about the weather?" I asked.

"We need napkins," she said. "We need a lot of things."

"We need a lot of things, for sure, but not now, mom."

"Well, I'm going," she said, "whether you want to or not. You might as well come along. Sit in the car. I'll go in. But if you say no, no it is. For me, I'm going."

"All right, I'll go," I said. "Give me some time to get ready." But when I looked out the window, a power line was on fire in the street. And I told her.

"Afraid?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Good," she smiled. "I'll get some things placed on the table so when we get back we can eat right away."

"Father will need to eat," I said.

"We'll set the table for him, too."

6

So an hour later, my mother got up from the couch and made her way into the kitchen. After she set the table she looked out the window. "It's getting bigger," she said and brought her fingers to her lips. Then she said nothing else, simply returned to the couch, picked up a book and began to read. She grabbed one of the pillows that represented



my father and put it under her head.

Of course, I asked her what was wrong, but she continued to read, ignoring me like she did every time she changed her mind.

Then—poof, just like that—she shut her eyes. I got up and headed to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I thought about my father and how he was so proud of the day he bought the couch and how he went on and on about the deal he made to get it. Over the years, he would talk about the money he saved, the comfort, the purpose of a couch. My mother would just listen and sip her soup. I was the one that would confront my father and ask, “Why do you talk so much about a couch?” My father liked that question. He told my mother, who told me one day when she was lying on the couch. He also said his only regret was he didn’t buy other things that he could have gotten for a song.

Why I was thinking about all that, I don’t know. Maybe I was preparing to say something so that my mother could understand I accepted her, period. But when I returned with the water, she was still lying on the couch, eyes closed.

7

Water began seeping out from under the carpeting. I dropped to my knees with a sponge and began wiping as much as I could. I stuffed towels where the water was gushing in, near the door, but it did not hold.

I tried waking my mother by shaking her, but there was this loud blast somewhere in the kitchen, and a huge wave of water rushed into the living room. I wanted to tell my mother we could leave, go through with her plan to go couch-shopping, buy things, or bring some food back, but I said nothing.

Then, as I moved my arms off of her and slid into the water, my mother opened her eyes and shouted, “I’ll need more lipstick and my coat.”

I had seconds to save myself, no more, so I thought and swam to the entrance. I turned one last time and saw the couch breaking through the glass door and my mother with this look on her face like she had finally realized what it meant, what it was all about.



A few weeks later, against the wall where the old couch was, there was a replacement I found, a used one with a bright floral design.

I ordered Chinese and had it delivered. After I finished in the kitchen I touched the couch a few times, looked at it from different angles, and then I plopped down. I noticed that the bedroom across the way was lacking beds, dressers—vacant, like it was before.

At four, after I read the newspaper several times and clipped out coupons for spaghetti sauce, the door opened and my father walked in. He didn't ask about mom, nor did he volunteer where he had been. It looked, I thought, like he didn't even realize the couch was replaced and the place was different. He just removed his shoes, picked up a section of the paper, and dropped down on the opposite side of the couch. Then he said something about being glad to be home. He was tired and looked forward to a long rest. I asked if he was hungry but he didn't answer, just pushed himself deep into the cushions and to sleep.

I waited some time as he kept at it, eyes closed, not stirring, just like my mother. And like a good son, I decided to stay still so as to not wake him. I was hungry and bored, but what could I do other than grab my pillow and wait?

As I did, the water in the kitchen started gushing again. And my father like my mother sailed through the plate glass window, the same story, etc.

I'm on the roof of a building across from the apartment. I bring binoculars to watch this family. I see a son. The son sneaks behind his mother and pushes her out the window. The father, too.

I know.